DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 231 205 FL 013 756

TITLE English Language Teaching Profile: Sri Lanka.
INSTITUTION British Council, London (England). English Language and Literature Div.
PUB DATE Aug 79
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Developing Nations; *Educational Policy; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Instructional Materials; *Language Role; *Second Language Instruction; Teacher Education
IDENTIFIERS *Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

This profile of the English language teaching situation in Sri Lanka examines the role of English in society and in the educational system. English is described as a necessary but not official language; within the educational system, a conflict is noted between official policy and the desires of the population. The English language curriculum is outlined from primary and secondary levels through the university, where it is taught as a degree subject in only two universities. Also noted is the position of English as a medium of instruction, as a service subject, and in technical institutes. The composition and qualifications of the teaching cadre are described and the pattern of teacher training is noted. Also discussed are (1) access to teaching materials, (2) English outside the educational system, (3) the extent of British support for the teaching of English, and (4) support from other quarters. A summary paragraph concludes that while the role of English in Sri Lanka is secure, it cannot easily be fitted into clear-cut categories; for the majority of learners it can be seen as a foreign language because there is little English in the environment, particularly in rural areas. (AMH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

The British Council

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED231205

FL013756

ENGLISH TEACHING INFORMATION CENTRE

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING PROFILE

Country: SRI LANKA

August 1979

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

1. Background

1.1 Until the mid 1950s English was the language of government, administration, the law and of most trade. In education English was the medium of instruction for the wealthy minority and the mother tongue of a small but influential group. At most it is estimated that 5 or 6% of the population were speakers of English but this small group held a preponderance of power and influence. The education available to most of the population was in Swabasha (Sinhala and Tamil). In 1954, six years after independence, the government started to phase out English medium-education altogether at primary and secondary level, though it still remains in some sections of tertiary education. This process was completed by 1978 when the last of the English medium streams finally left the system. The result of this change, coupled with the emigration of the majority of the mother tongue English speakers, has been a great decline in both the numbers of competent English speakers and in the quality of the English spoken.

1.2 The strains arising from the change to national languages were beginning to show in the early 1970s, although the Government of Mrs Bandaranaike were unable to acknowledge them publicly. An acknowledgement of the problem, and a determination to do something about it, came with the UNP Governmenmt of Mr J R Jayawardene which took power in July 1977. Critics claim that it was merely responding to the pressures of its wealthier supporters who had been alarmed by the declining English standards of their children. A political opponent might observe that this was an attempt to retain English as a language of privilege: if all children were taught English equally, then the advantage the children from wealthier families had in entering the more lucrative professions in Engineering, the Law, Medicine and the Sciences where English was necessary, would be taken away. Special provisions for English would only reach the urban centres and the wealthier classes.

What really is the problem and the cause of the strain? Obviously transitional strains arise within the system when tasks traditionally done in English begin to be done in the native languages. But there are two causes which are unlikely to be transitional. The first is that a language area of no more than 12 million people, as is the case with Sinhala, cannot adequately offer courses such as medicine, engineering, the sciences and some technical subjects, in the native language. Since these courses lead to professions in which employment is plentiful and the rewards lucrative all eyes are set on them. The second cause, complementary to the first, is that the political and philosophical basis of the educational system in Sri Lanka, is the provision of a channel, some would say the only channel, through which an individual of intelligence and determination, can progress up the social and economic scale. Without an adequate provision of English within the state schooling system, the highest professions are not within the grasp of the lowliest individual.

The emphasis of the present Government, whatever the nature of the pressure put upon it by its supporters, is on massive schemes for the teaching of English throughout the country, both within the school system and without. Encouragement is given to the private sector to help tackle the problem too. But it is to be questioned whether, in the short to medium term, the resources are available to tackle the problem in an adequate way.

1.3 The official status of English might be described as a 'necessary but not official' language. The 'official' language is Sinhala, while both Sinhala and Tamil are designated 'national' languages. Nevertheless much of the legal system operates through English and laws are published in English as well as the two 'national' languages, though the English version is not the definitive one in cases of disputed interpretation.

1.4 English is to a large extent used as a common language for communication between Sinhala speakers and Tamil speakers. It is however not official policy to teach it as a link language, the preferred, though poorly implemented, policy being for each group to learn the other's language. In the main, however, English is the de facto link language.

1.5 There is a thriving English press with four dailies and two Sunday papers in English as well as a number of periodicals.

1.6 The Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation broadcasts daily in English on two Channels.

2. English in the Educational System

At present the official purpose of English language teaching is reading comprehension. This does not, however, reflect the desires of most learners, who are more interested in being able to speak English. In addition the shift in Sri Lanka from being an ESL country (for the minority) to being an EFL country (for almost everyone) causes problems of motivation and methodology.

2.1 Primary and Secondary Level

2.1.1 English is a compulsory subject from Grade III (7+) to Grade XII. However, a shortage of teachers, means that perhaps only 50-60% of the Grade III level age group are actually taught English and in remote and rural areas there are still schools where English is not taught at all.

With the introduction of an integrated curriculum at primary level the Ministry of Education stipulates that at least 35 minutes per day be spent on English and from Grade VI upwards the time allocated is 5 forty minute periods per week.

Despite being a compulsory subject English is not a compulsory pass at GCE 'O' level which is taken at the end of Grade IX after seven years English. The effect of this is to reduce motivation and in practice the English textbooks are not bought by poorer children.

2.1.2 There is no English literature at GCE 'O' level, nor are there literature papers in Sinhala or Tamil at this level. A very few children, however, take London GCE 'O' level literature privately. These children are inevitably from English-speaking homes and most of them are being educated in the larger towns.

2.1.3 The previous government instituted the National Certificate of General Education (NCGE) from December 1975 and the National Certificate of Higher Education (NCHE) from December 1977 to replace the Sri Lanka GCE 'O' level and 'A' levels. This change has been reversed by the present government and 'O' and 'A' levels are once again used. This see-saw has caused some confusion for the students affected.

2.1.4 Although English is not a formal requirement for advancement within the educational system, it is becoming increasingly important in the job market down to quite low levels. It is also essential for entry to the 6 teacher training colleges where teachers of English are trained, and for entry to university courses where English is the sole or partial medium. These include Medicine, Engineering and most Science courses.

2.1.5 The responsibility for syllabuses and choice of textbooks is completely controlled by the Ministry of Education.

2.1.6 The Inspectorate is advised by the English Language unit of the Ministry of Education Curriculum Development and Teacher Education Centre. These are currently 25 Specialist Inspectors, known as Circuit Education Officers (English) who cover the whole island. 21 of the CEOs have been trained in Britain under British Council auspices. There is also a cadre of 26 In-Service Advisers responsible under the CEO's for in-service training.

2.1.7 No teaching tapes or films are used at primary or secondary level.

2.2 Universities

There are at present six universities and two unversity colleges in existence. There are plans to establish a further two.

Universities:	Colombo
	Kelaniya
	Moratuwa
	Sri Jayawardenapura
	Peradeniya
	Jaffna
University Colleges:	Dumbara
	Matara (Ruhuna)
Planned	Batticaloa
	Kurunegala

English plays different roles in each of them and there is no common policy regarding its use.

2.2.1 English as a degree subject

English is taught as a degree subject in only two of the universities, Peradeniya and Kelaniya. The numbers of students are very small and the courses are heavily biased towards literature, though both contain a small linguistics component.

2.2.2 English as a medium of instruction

Here the situation varies dramatically according to university and subject being taught. In general the teaching in Faculties of Medicine, Architecture and Engineering is through the medium of English from an early stage. In the Natural Sciences a common pattern is for the first year to be taught through the medium of Sinhala or Tamil with a change to English from the second year on. This is particularly the case for Honours degrees, which involve a further year's study after the three year General degree. In Colombo the first year lectures are given twice, once in Sinhala and once in English. Students are expected to attend both in order to be able to cope with their studies from the second year on where lectures are given only in English. In the Social Sciences, Arts and Education Faculties English is not normally used as a medium of instruction though there is a movement towards using it as a partial medium in some Faculties, notably Economics. Overall a very confused situation.

2.2.3 English as a service subject

There are Service English courses given at all the universities. The amount varies but a common pattern is 10-15 hours per week in the first year, reduced to 5 per week by the third. The courses are given by Instructors many of whom are part-time and few of whom have had any training above that for a secondary school teacher. Materials tend to be ad hoc and not designed as a course. The official aim of these courses is to teach a reading knowledge of English but this is resisted by the students who prefer to have spoken English as an asset for their future job-seeking. There is at present considerable dissatisfaction with the Service English courses, from the students, from other Faculties and Departments who complain that the students cannot read recommended texts and not least from the English departments themselves who have no clear policy to work to. A number of meetings and conferences are being held in an attempt to remedy the situation and there are likely to be major changes in the content and organisation of these courses.

2.3 Technical Education

2.3.1 Technical Institutes

The Ministry of Higher education has 19 Technical Institutes with a total student population of about 13,000, of which approximately half are full-time day students and half part-time, mostly evening students. Levels range from Professional and Higher National Diploma courses of 4 years or more through National Diploma and National Certificate courses, to craft level courses of 6 months to two years. Some National Diploma and all Professional/HND courses are offered in English-medium as well as Sinhala and Tamil (two of the five HND level courses being offered in English-medium only); National Certificate (with the exception of English Stenography), National Craftsman Certificate and short craft level courses are offered only in Sinhala/Tamil-medium. English instruction is given on all full-time day courses of 2 years or more; on Certificate courses 2 hours per week, on Diploma courses between 2 and 5 hours per week. English instruction is not given as an element of any part-time courses. Instruction is given

either by full-time Instructors (graduates, usually without a teaching or other qualification) or by part-time Visiting Instructors (usually non-graduate secondary school teachers). English is not examined on any Sinhala/Tamil-medium course. A Committee of Inquiry into Technical Education which will have completed its work by mid-1979 is expected to recommend a number of changes to the present structure.

Some Technical Institutes offer 2-year courses leading to the National Diploma in English and National Diploma in Foreign Languages (one of which is English). Instruction on these courses is given by Lecturers (graduates in English, usually with a further qualification). These courses which have only recently started do not seem to lead to any specific employment area, and in fact many of the students abandon the courses before completion if they succeed in getting employment.

3. Teaching Cadre

Three are in theory enough teachers of English (if one includes untrained and unqualified teachers) to supply at least one teacher to every school. In practice there are many schools in the rural areas where there is no teacher. It is very difficult to recruit teachers for the remote areas and still more difficult to keep them there. The attempt to recruit teachers on a regional basis has alleviated but by no means solved the problem.

3.1 The English teaching cadre is almost entirely local, except at tertiary level where 6 VSOs in the Technical Colleges and 2 in a special programme Teacher-Training College at Bolawalana are due to start work in September 1979.

3.2 60% of the teachers are qualified, ie have specialist college training; or are graduates with English; or are English-medium graduates with or without training; or have a Diploma in Education with English methods; or are English general-trained teachers, trained before 1959. 40% are unqualified - that is with the minimum qualifications of 'O' level English and no pre-service training.

3.3 The pattern of teacher training was that teachers entered the specialist colleges for a 2 year course after several years experience in the schools. In January 1979, however, a new system was started on the sandwich-course principle. Teachers will now be trained for three years on the basis of six months in college followed by six months in the schools and so on. It remains to be seen whether the administrative complications of this scheme will be satisfactorily resolved.

3.4 The specialist colleges currently take a total of 800 teachers a year but this figure will vary according to the numbers being recruited into the profession.

3.5 A new project (with a Director recruited under the KELT scheme) is to run intensive 3-6 month in-service courses on a residential basis at a Teacher-Training college at Bolawalana near Negombo part of which is being specially adapted. This scheme is expected to start operating in the latter half of 1979.

3.6 The University of Colombo runs a one year course for graduate teachers of English and English-medium graduates which leads to a Diploma in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language. The form and content

of this course are currently being revised to allow for some specialisation, notably in the field of ESP.

3.7 In-service Advisers of the Ministry of Education are given periodic retraining by the English Language Division of the Ministry's Curriculum Development and Teacher Education Centre. They are peripatetic within their regions and run at least 10 study circles per month in their areas. Annual courses have been run by the Ministry of Education (with Council professional and financial assistance) for selected participants, particularly teacher-trainers. ELT specialists have visited the island for these courses, details of which are in London.

3.8 The Teachers' Unions are:

All Ceylon English Teachers' Union
English Secondary-Trained Teachers' Union
Instructors' Union (in the universities)

3.9 There are two professional associations.

The Sri Lanka English Association (SLEA)
The Sri Lanka Association for the Teaching of English (SLATE)

Both are active, holding lectures, and seminars. SLEA has a more literary bias. SLEA publishes a journal 'Navasilu' twice a year.

4. Teaching Materials

The new series of textbooks which were introduced starting in 1972 and running from Grades VI to XII are now under revision. Grade VI to IX cover the main core of grammar and a vocabulary of 2051 words. The textbooks are published by the Ministry of Education and no commercially published material is in use at primary and secondary levels. Tapes and films are not used.

4.1 Although education is free, textbooks are bought by parents who often cannot afford them given the low incomes at all levels of society. Prices are, in local terms, high because of the high cost of paper and printing. Paper is imported. The English textbooks are of low priority to parents and children since English is not a formal requirement for progress within the educational system.

4.2 Supplementary readers in English are being prepared for Grade IX. The series (12 books each) for Grades VI-VIII are complete. They are produced by the Department of Educational Publications under the guidance of the English Division of the Ministry of Education. 4000 under-privileged schools are entitled to these books free, but the distribution system is weak.

5. English outside the Educational System

There is a very large demand for English as it is required by an increasing number of employers for all levels of job.

5.1 There are a very large number of 'tutories' or private crammers in Colombo and other places, which teach English. They have no official recognition and are staffed by teachers using their spare time or in retirement. They cater for children and adults who have failed to learn English and other subjects within the system.

5.2 An increasing number of government departments, commercial organisations, banks etc organise English classes in the evenings for their staff. The teachers are part-time and materials almost non-existent. The aim is always general proficiency rather than ESP.

5.3 The Ministry of Education has a programme of weekend courses in English through its Adult Education Unit. As with most courses in English the problem is getting competent teachers and adequate materials, the money available being very limited indeed, particularly for materials. The aim is to have up to 150 centres running these courses throughout the country. The programme has started too recently to make any assessment of its success possible.

6. British Support for the Teaching of English

From September 1965 to April 1978 the main British input into the system was the establishment of a post under the Aid to Commonwealth English Scheme within the Curriculum Development Centre of the Ministry of Education. This post, held by a succession of officers, had two main tasks, involvement in in-service training for teachers and above all the writing and development of the English textbooks which are currently in use in the schools. When in 1978 the latter task was almost complete, though supplementary materials are still being produced, the post was closed down. It made, at the time, a major contribution to the teaching of English in Sri Lanka, though the end product with reading comprehension as its aim, is open to criticism now with the changes of emphasis currently taking place.

Current British support in this area can be summarised as follows:

6.1 English for Technical Education Project

This project is headed by an Adviser in ESP under the KELT scheme. It began in September 1978 and its aims are to improve the quality of English teaching in the Technical Colleges both by developing relevant materials and by giving in-service training to the cadre of teachers. It is anticipated that the KELT officer will be supported from September 1979 by 6 VSOs who will be posted to key Technical Institutes.

6.2 In-service Training for Teachers of English Project

This project is also headed by a KELT officer. The objectives are to set up and run intensive residential in-service courses of up to 3 months for teachers from secondary schools. The project, located at the Government Teacher's College Bolawalana near Negombo, is only just beginning (1979). 2 VSOs will form part of the team.

6.3 Direct Teaching of English Project

This project is now into the detailed planning stage. The British Council will be starting the Direct Teaching of English at its own centre as part of the aid programme financed by the ODA. The senior academic and teaching staff will be recruited from Britain while most of the teachers will be Sri Lankans who will be trained by the Centre. The students will be drawn from Government Ministries and the public sector, from areas where a lack of English is proving a handicap to Sri Lanka's development. The project is intended to come into full-stream operation in early 1981 in purpose-built premises. The Centre will concentrate on ESP courses for most of which the material will be designed and produced locally.

6.4 Periodic Book Exhibitions are held and books are presented under the Books Presentation Programme to various institutions concerned with the teaching of English.

6.5 British books are in use in universities and specialist colleges, non-specialist colleges and central schools. There are Council libraries in Colombo and Kandy, the Colombo library being one of the most heavily used British Council librarys in the world. British tapes and films are used from time to time in training programmes.

6.6 Awards and grants are made from British funds to assist in various aspects of the teaching of English.

6.7 Experts from Britain are brought from time to time to take part in training courses and seminars.

6.8 The Hornby Trust has given assistance in various forms over the last few years.

7. Other support for the Teaching of English

7.1 United States of America

7.1.1 The American Library has a good collection of American ELT books and some ELT films. Copies of the ELT periodical 'Forum' are distributed widely. They actively support the Sri Lanka English Association (SLEA).

7.1.2 Since 1975 three American academics have come to Sri Lanka and worked in the fields of TEFL and Linguistics.

7.2 Australia

Since 1975 there have been 3 ELT Colombo Plan Scholarships to Australia.

7.3 Other

There is a proposal for an aid project for English at Primary level which may be financed by Norway (1979).

8. Summary

8.1 The role of English in Sri Lanka cannot easily be fitted in to the classical divisions of 'mother tongue', 'second language' and 'foreign language'. Depending on where one looks it can be all three. It is the mother tongue only of a tiny minority, but it is nonetheless a mother tongue for some Sri Lankans. It appears to fulfil some of the roles of a second language but by no means all: only at tertiary level does it appear as the medium of instruction in some areas; it has a major role in the legal system though by no means the only one; it does serve as 'a language in common' between Sinhalese and Tamils though it has no official status in this role; it plays a major part in keeping Sri Lanka running yet constitutionally it is neither an official nor a national language.

From the position of the vast majority of learners it can only be seen as a foreign language since outside the main towns there is next to no English in the environment, and many will have no opportunity to use it at all.

8.2 Overall the role of English in Sri Lanka, however one classifies it, seems secure. There are nevertheless severe problems, falling standards and a reduction in the numbers of competent speakers coupled with an enormous increase in demand which will be very difficult to satisfy in a situation where really competent teachers are in short supply and there is little money available for any form of teaching material. The only real danger is if an inability to meet the demands that have been aroused leads to disillusion and resentment towards those who manage to get adequate English, and for whom the doors of social and economic advancement are more open.

If this Profile is more than a year old further up-to-date information may be found in ETIC Archives.

The British Council
Sri Lanka

August 1979